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Leading Leaders

The game of football is one of the greatest sports on the planet; due to as many viewers there are around the world, to play the game, you must have a particular skill set. You first of all must be someone who is willing to put in a lot of time and effort. The Roman empires weren’t built in one day; it takes a lot of time to get good at this game. You must be tough both mentally and physically. I know some people watch this game and think to themselves, “Wow! This game is so physical!” and it is, but believe it or not, its more mentally challenging than it is physically by a landslide. The game is 90% mental, and 10% physical. Reason being, anybody can play this game, but not everybody wants to put the work in, and get over obstacles. In a typical football game, there are sudden changes, like turning the ball over, or letting up a big touchdown. Mentally tough teams know how to get over those challenges, maintain their cool, and respond well when they go back on to the field. This game also requires focus. If you don’t have focus, you won’t have any idea what you are doing come game time, and you will make yourself, and you’re team look bad. The biggest thing that this game requires is leadership. Who motivates one to be tough? A leader does, weather that leader is a coach who wants you to play for him, or a player that wants you to be playing by him one day. Who asks for you undivided attention when you’re in meetings? The coach who leads you’re team, and wants you to be successful so his team can be successful. Coaches are the biggest leaders in any organization, and in any sport. Coaches mold leaders for their team, and with doing so; the players’ leadership follows them down the road to be great leaders when they are done playing the game.

Not everybody can be a leader, right? Wrong. Anybody can be a leader; all’s it takes is commitment, and doing the right thing when nobody else wants to. How does a coach make a leader though? A coach makes a leader by motivating players by word of mouth. The head coach, John Bonamego, whom I currently play for, is the best motivator that I have ever been around. The way that he motivates is so unorthodox. He tells crazy stories that all have some meaning behind them. Every team meeting, he is so intense in how he addresses the team, and how he wants business handled. He motivates all of us student athletes to play our hearts out for him. He tells us every day to lead on and off the field. He tells us to go to class everyday and sit in the first row. He has us do community service to make the city of Mt. Pleasant a better place. How is that leading? Well, in order to make something better, it requires the help of people. He’s hoping that if the community sees football players trying to help out, that maybe those people who weren’t helping in the first place will join. We would be the change. He tells us to be the change that we want to see. In order to do so, we must be leaders and change things to the way that they should be. He also tells us to be the best that we can be. That has a lot of football meaning behind it, but it also carries over to life after football. When he motivates us, we deliver, and for that reason, I know that when my career is over, I will be a fantastic leader.

It is so important to become a leader, reason being, all jobs love people that are leaders. Lets break this down. The United States Census Bureau stated that in the United States of America, there are 151,781,326 males.(2010). CBS News stated that of all the men in the USA, there are only 1,088,158 men that play football. (2014) That number diminished tremendously. In the article “Odds of Getting In”, the author stated that there are 12,650 players that play at the highest level of college football. (2016). Of those players, NFL.com stated that there are only 1,696 players in the league. (2016) Figure 1 shows the odds of getting to the top level.

* Figure 1 shows high school football players, Division 1 collegiate football players, and NFL players in the United States of America.
* 99% of this chart is high school football players. Less than 1% is NFL players.
* This just shows how hard it is to get into the National Football League. Playing high school football is almost guaranteed. 1% of all high school football players will get into a Division 1 college, and only about 13% of that 1% will get into the NFL.

The language of football molds leaders. There are so many different aspects of football where different language is required. For instance, when you’re in the locker room after practice, no language is really required. The language is very loose, a lot of people joking around with other people. The atmosphere is very fun, and relaxed. When you’re in a team meeting, you have to tighten up, and focus in on the head coach. What he has to say is very important. He is usually the only one who talks in team meetings. When you’re in a position meeting, depending on who your coach is, the language is somewhat loose, but you still have to be tight. He talks for about 75% of the meeting, and the other 25% is he quizzing players on what they are supposed to do on a certain play. When you’re on the field is where language amongst units (either offensive or defensive) is the most important for players. For example, if said to you, “We’re running right out three ram y drive f orbit” and asked you what route you were supposed to run if you are a running back, you would have no idea what to do. To learn the plays, you must be a leader, and do it on your own. Lead yourself to success. The language of our offense is hard at first, but after you take initiative to put your nose in the playbook, it becomes second nature. In order to be successful on and off of the field, you must acquire leadership.

In the article, “Kelly and Leadership Part 1: Developing Leaders Inside and Out” written by SEE, the author interviewed Brian Kelly (Notre Dame head football coach, and ex CMU football coach, and in the interview, Brian Kelly said “You can move them to a level that they can’t get to by themselves. That’s player development. That’s at the core of what I mean, to get people to do things they normally wouldn’t do on their own.” (2010) When he says “them” he is referring to the football players. In the same article, “Kelly and Leadership Part 1: Developing Leaders Inside and Out” written by SEE, the author interviewed a player that played for Brian Kelly, and he stated, “He really challenges you to perform… he encourages you enough, but at the same time, he’s challenging you to step your game up to the level that he sees the potential at, and the coaching staff saw the potential in you to play. I think I was (a better player), and I think more importantly, I was a much better person… I think he really helped complete me as a man, with being a tough-minded individual. That’s one thing he always talked about, was mental toughness and being able to see things and not get down on one little mistake, or one bad play.” (2010) This is a prime example on how the language of football molds leaders. The player that played for him didn’t have to say any of this. This is the truth, and the whole truth.

In Eric Swanson’s article, “Being an Effective Team Coach”, (this is by far the best article that I came acrossed) he stated, “Effective coaching is about changing the future. Every coach is a coach because at some point in time he determined that he could make a difference for the destiny of a team and in the lives of individuals. He has decided that through his influence mentoring, love and leadership, he can help people and groups of people be what they never thought they could become. Coaches believe that people and the future will be better because of them.” (2015) This statement is spot on. When you coach, you are developing leaders for the future. Without coaches, there would not be as many leaders. Coaches are teachers for the game, but more importantly life. Eric Swanson also noted from his article “Being an Effective Team Coach”, “One element common to all effective coaches is this: they realize that their success is tied to their ability to make others successful. Their joy is in the development and victories of those on their team. As a ministry leader, you are a player-coach – a player who coaches and a coach who plays. The measure of your effectiveness is the development and accomplishment of those on your team – motivating and preparing others to play and win.” What this means is that if you can make others successful, you will be successful. When you’re team develops and accomplishes what they can, your doing you’re job, and a great job at that. As I stated above, this is definitely the best article that I have come across. I would put his entire article on here, but I have other very important sources to get to.

In Ginger Emas Schlanger’s article “What Can College Football’s Most Dominant Coach Teach Us About Values Based Leadership?” she interviewed one of college football’s best coaches, Nick Saban’s assistant head football coach, Mario Cristobal, and he said, “[Nick’s] always on the attack to improve. He always says to us, ‘You need to look yourself in the mirror and ask yourself, What are you not good at? Confront it and demand yourself a way to fix it.” (2016) This is excellent. As a great leader, you are always looking for ways to improve. If you don’t improve as a leader, the people following you can’t improve. By working on yourself, it allows you to get passed those boundaries, and become a person that is unstoppable. No wonder he is one of the greatest coaches to ever live. He tries to improve each and every day.

Later in the article “What Can College Football’s Most Dominant Coach Teach Us About Values Based Leadership?”, Ginger Emas Schlanger talked about one of Saban’s points, “Win the moment.””Best-selling author, speaker, former SI editor, and Leadercast Now speaker, Don Yaeger, has interviewed Coach Saban and gleaned his top leadership tactics. In a recent blog, Don discussed Coach Saban’s approach when he was coaching at Michigan State. Says Don, “Shortly before playing No. 1 ranked Ohio State, Saban told the players to focus on executing the next play and not to worry about winning. The outcome: Michigan State upset the Buckeyes 28-24, giving Saban one the firs major wins in his storied career. This is simple yet profound tactic. Humans spend too much time thinking about past mistakes or way-in-the-future events; such micro-focus can have paralyzing effects on a team. Saban teaches his players to ‘win the moment’ – it’s not about what was accomplished in the past and tomorrow isn’t promised for anyone. Winning is about the present.” (2016)

Winning is in the present, but it is also in the past. By the past, I don’t mean games that you already won; I mean all of the work that players put into the offseason training and winter conditioning. That is where games are won. “If you outwork your opposition, winning will take care of itself.” –John Bonamego. Winning the moment is just as important though. Some teams problem is that they freak out “in the moment”. They lose their composure when they play big teams and forget whom they are. You must stay calm in this game while attacking your opponent. When you lose your composure, they will know. This is (college) football. The other team that your playing are like primal animals. They know when you are freaking out, and they will attack when all composure is lost. When that happens, they gain momentum, and once a team has momentum, they will be very hard to stop.

In the article, “Leadership the John Wooden Way: 4 Characteristics of Great Coaches”, the author quoted Don Yaeger in his “16 Characteristics of Greatness”, ““The greatest leaders in sports are able to visualize victory even before the game starts,” Yaeger says. But when it comes to success, “seeing” and “believing” are just part of the equation. What great coaches understand is that visualization must be backed up with real world hard work. Preparation only comes through practice, and men like Coach Wooden were willing to put in the work – and always convince his players to do the same. “I spent a lot of time with Coach Wooden,” Yaeger said. “He was never frazzled, and always seemed two steps ahead of everyone. But more than that, [Wooden] was more prepared than anyone else in the room.”” (2012) Great coaches anticipate and recognize every situation that can come up. How do they do that though? Through hours of film study and learning from the leader that taught them. Leaders must maintain their composure. When the leader loses his composure, his followers will do the same. As I stated earlier, when you lose you’re composure, the outcome is never good.

Preparation is the key to victory. Coach Bonamego tells this story quite frequently in our team room, and it goes a little something like this, “It’s a hot sunny day and you just get out of practice. You’re girlfriend calls you and tell you that she is going to 7/11 and wants to know if you want something, and you tell her that you want a 44-ounce slurpee. When she gets to the counter to pull out her money, she spills the slurpee all over the counter. When she does that the guy behind the counter slaps her square in the face. When she comes home she tells you what happened, and you go to the store and hop over the counter to defend you’re women. When you do so, the guy behind the counter roundhouse kicks you in the face and knocks you out. The guy behind the counter is a professional kick boxer. See, you were ready to fight, but you were not prepared. So you do some digging and find out that he is blind in his left eye, he runs five miles every morning, and takes the same route every single day. So you watch him for a couple of days, and on the seventh day of watching him, you wait for him to get done with his run, and approach him from his left side and punch him right in the face. Here, you were ready and prepared, and you were victorious.” After the story, he always tells us never to be violent off of the football field, and if this ever happens to contact the authorities. No great leader would preach violence when it isn’t necessary. Be a piece of steel wrapped in velvet is what coach always tells us. The story was just to provide insight on the difference of being ready and being prepared.

Not all coaches lead the way that all athletes love: a players coach, one who rarely yells and can still get the job done. In an opposing view of what 99.9% of athletes prefer, the author thinks that the old way of leading is the best way of leading: coaches who act like drill sergeants and scream their ever-loving behinds off at a player. In the article, “Where is Leadership in Sport Going: the Future of Leadership” the author stated, “How can someone lead a team if they can’t lead themselves? The way we have looked at the concepts of leadership and team has to change considerably, we are at the threshold of some revolutionary changes in how we thing about both areas. The challenge of course is how to best embrace this new leadership direction and enhance the leadership abilities of each individual whilst fitting it into a team environment and…. most importantly…ensure that it makes a measurable impact on performance.” (2016) The author probably played back in the day when screaming and yelling was the style of coaching. I for one, have played for a screamer and yeller, and let me tell you, it was the most miserable experience of my life. That style of coaching is outdated and irrelevant. A good coach knows that different people respond to different styles of coaching. To motivate me, the only thing that you have to do is tell me to do something, and I will do it. Some players like to get screamed at, not me. It’s not for everybody. The more versatile a coach is in the way he coaches will result in more success.

In the next article, “Dick Vitale: What Coaches Can Teach Us About Leadership” written by Larry Dobrow, he talked with Dick Vitale (one of the best voices in sports broadcasting) and he stated, “Keep it simple, then commit: the past and current college coaches that Vitale singles out as superior leaders – former North Carolina basketball coach Dean Smith, current Duke and USA Olympics basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski, former Alabama football coach Paul “Bear” Bryant – go out of their way not to over-complicate matters for their team members and staff. They set the tone by being accountable for their actions and by having a game plan for each day. They’re all about discipline and they’re all about being organized… Everyone talks about goals, but it is the commitment to make those goals a reality that separates them.” This is very true. When you make things simple, and keep them that way, players can play to their highest potential. And with discipline comes success. When you teach discipline to young adults, it goes with them a long way, thus molding leaders down the road, that’s what this is all about. Coaches know just as players do that we are limited to four years of eligibility. So they aren’t only in this to have a successful football team, they are in it to have future successful men on their football team.

In the peer reviewed article, “Clear Eyes, Full Hearts Can Lose: Friday Night Lights, and the Myth of the Rewarding of Morality in Sports”, Benjamin P. Phillips discussed football in the great state of Texas, and how they made a television show about it. He stated, “Football is often linked to the affirmation of the American Dream: work ethic, sacrifice, and the importance of every person leading to success and a better life.” (Pg. 990)(2014) That sums it up pretty well. As I have stated multiple times before, coaches want to lead players to success, no matter how much time it takes, or the amount of motivation that it takes to get players there.

In the next peer review article that I read, it didn’t focus on sports, but what it did focus on was teaching and learning. Coaches are teachers, and players are students. In “Teaching and Learning: Using Experiential Learning and Reflection for Leadership Education” written by Kathy L. Guthrie, and Tamara Bertrand Jones they said, “Leadership experiences, arguably some of the most significant developmental opportunities in college, are ripe for helping students move from mere engagement to making meaning of and learning from their leadership experience.” (Pg. 53)(2012) Coaching helps players move from just being a player, to becoming a leader and know how to use his leadership skills in everyday life.

On Tuesday of March 15, 2016, I had the pleasure to sit back and observe the Central Michigan Football team. Yes, I do play for them, and some might say that this is a cop out, but not necessarily. I am always in the same meetings as all of the other guys, and have been doing so for some time now. But I have never actually sat back and observed how people took in coaching, and how they reacted. One of the things that I was looking for was how the coaches got their players motivated. When I observed, it was the first practice of the spring, and the first practice is the most important practice. It sets the bar for how the rest of the spring will go. Throughout the opening meeting of spring, the head coach hits on all of the topics that he finds important: being tough both physically and mentally, outworking the opposition, compete to the fullest, this is a high performance business, and you must have leadership. He went into great detail about that one. He stated, “Everybody is a leader by example. If you guys weren’t, you wouldn’t be here. In order to truly lead, you must be willing to do and say what others won’t, that will benefit the whole team, both on and off the field.” I found that pretty motivating to go out on the field and practice as hard as I could.

Another thing that sparked my interest was how the coaches would react to mistakes on the field, and how the player would react to his reaction. Practice begins, and now I sit back and wait for a player to make a mistake. About an hour goes by, and we go into our first team period. The very first play, one of the running backs fumbles the ball. As soon as he got over to the sideline, the running back coach and the head coach go over to him very angrily. They both talked to him very sternly, telling him that turning the ball over is unacceptable. After he got yelled at, he went over to the sideline with his head held high and showed no disappointment in himself. I was shocked. Had it been me that fumbled, my whole week would have been ruined. That’s my biggest problem, but that is another story for a later day. After he got talked to very sternly, both coaches went over to talk to him and let him know that they just want him to be the best he can be, and he is to good to be fumbling the ball. He said that he knows, and he won’t let it happen again.

What I saw was amazing. Like I stated earlier, I never get to truly sit back and watch how players take criticism, nor do I watch the coaches give it out. What I found out was that some of our coaches yell at the top of their lungs, but they do so to teach. And after they are done yelling, they go and talk to the player and let him know why they yelled, and they lift the player up. That’s what coaches are supposed to do. Encourage players to get better every day, until one day it just becomes second nature. That is when a coach truly succeeded at making a leader.

In my opinion, football is the greatest sport that there is. What makes it the greatest sport is the person who is leading you. You can walk in every day with a smile on your face, ready to go to work for you’re coach, or you can go in scared to make a mistake because you will get you’re head ripped off. I have played for both types of coaches, and I like the one that I have now a whole lot better. The coach that I have today is molding me into the great leader that I am going to be one day. He makes me want to get better daily by making himself want to get better daily. All great coaches want their players to be the best that they can be day in and day out, and that is the reason that great football coaches mold great leaders.

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